

Environment

Note. Accounting for Carbon Dioxide Emissions From Biomass Energy Combustion. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from the combustion of biomass to produce energy are excluded from the energy-related CO₂ emissions reported in the *Annual Energy Review*. According to current international convention (see the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s “2006 IPCC Guidelines for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories”), carbon released through biomass combustion is excluded from reported energy-related emissions. The release of carbon from biomass combustion is assumed to be balanced by the uptake of carbon when the feedstock is grown, resulting in zero net emissions over some period of time. (This is not to say that biomass energy is carbon-neutral. Energy inputs are required in order to grow, fertilize, and harvest the feedstock and to produce and process the biomass into fuels.)

However, analysts have debated whether increased use of biomass energy may result in a decline in terrestrial carbon stocks, leading to a net positive release of carbon rather than the zero net release assumed by its exclusion from reported energy-related emissions. For example, the clearing of forests for biofuel crops could result in an initial release of carbon that is not fully recaptured in subsequent use of the land for agriculture.

To reflect the potential net emissions, the international convention for greenhouse gas inventories is to report biomass emissions in the category “agriculture, forestry, and other land use,” usually based on estimates of net changes in carbon stocks over time.

This indirect accounting of CO₂ emissions from biomass can potentially lead to confusion in accounting for and understanding the flow of CO₂ emissions within energy and non-energy systems. In recognition of this issue, reporting of CO₂ emissions from biomass combustion alongside other energy-related CO₂ emissions offers an alternative accounting treatment. It is important, however, to avoid misinterpreting emissions from fossil energy and biomass energy sources as necessarily additive. Instead, the combined total of direct CO₂ emissions from biomass and energy-related CO₂ emissions implicitly assumes that none of the carbon emitted was previously or subsequently reabsorbed in terrestrial sinks or that other emissions sources offset any such sequestration.

According to the EIA’s *Annual Energy Outlook 2010*, including direct CO₂ emissions from biomass energy combustion would increase the 2008 total for energy-related CO₂ emissions by 353 million metric tons (6.1 percent). If in fact these emissions are all offset by biological sequestration, the net emissions would be zero as assumed in EIA’s totals.